The Island of Self; The Three Dharma Seals

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Dear Sangha, good morning. Today is the 28th of July 1998, and we are in the Upper Hamlet. We are going to speak English today.

When I was a small boy, at the age of seven or eight, I happened to see a drawing of the Buddha on the cover of a Buddhist magazine. The Buddha was sitting on the grass, very peacefully, very beautifully, and I was very impressed. The artist must have had a lot of peace within himself, so that when he drew the Buddha, the Buddha was so peaceful. Looking at the drawing of the Buddha made me happy, because around me people were not very calm, or very happy. When I saw the drawing of the Buddha I was very impressed, and I suddenly had the idea that I wanted to become someone like him, someone who could sit very still and peacefully. I think that was the moment that I first wanted to become a monk, but I did not know that. I wanted to be like the Buddha.

You know that the Buddha is not a god, the Buddha was just a human being like all of us, and he suffered very much as a teenager. He saw the suffering in his kingdom, he saw how his father King Shuddhodana was trying hard to make the suffering less, but he seemed to be helpless. So the political way did not seem to him to be a very effective one. As a teenager the young Siddhartha was trying to find a way out of the situation of suffering. He was always searching and searching for the way. I think that today many young people also do as the young Siddhartha did: you look around yourselves, you don't see anything really beautiful, really good, and really true, so you are confused. You are searching, looking very hard to see whether there is something really beautiful, really good or really true to embrace and follow.

I was very young, and yet I did have that kind of feeling in me. That is why, when I saw the drawing of the Buddha, I was so happy. I just wanted to be like him. And I was told that if you practice well, you can be like a Buddha. The Buddha is not a god; the Buddha is just a human being like us. Anyone that is peaceful, loving and understanding can be called a Buddha. There were many Buddhas in the past, there are Buddhas in the present moment, and there will be many Buddhas in the future. Buddha is not the name of someone; Buddha is just a common name, to designate someone who has a high degree of peace, who has a high degree of understanding and compassion.

When I was about eleven, I went for a picnic on the mountain of Na Son, together with several hundred boys and girls from my school. I was very excited about that picnic, because I learned that we were going to climb the mountain Na Son, and on the top was a monk, who lived there as a hermit and practiced in order to become a Buddha. I had had picnics before, but this one was so special, because I knew that if I climbed to the top of the mountain I would see the hermit, see someone who was practicing in order to become like a Buddha. So that was my secret hope, to be able to meet with the hermit. A hermit is someone who practices alone, who does not want to be disturbed, and who wants to devote all of his time to the practice.

At that time I did not know anything about the practice of mindful breathing, or mindful walking; I did not know what walking meditation was. We organized in teams of five boys, and we brought with us a few bottles of boiled water, and rice balls. We squeezed cooked rice into the shape of bread, and it was so compact that you could cut the rice into slices, and you would eat your rice with sesame seeds, crushed roast peanuts, and a little bit of salt. I think that in Plum Village you'll have to organize that kind of picnic some day--just a slice of rice, eaten with

sesame seeds—it’s very delicious. Since I did not know how to practice walking meditation, we tried to climb as quickly as possible. We got very tired. We had hardly come halfway up the mountain before we were exhausted, and the worse thing was that we had drunk all our water. We got very thirsty. So we tried our best, and when we had climbed to the top, we were completely exhausted, and thirsty; and we were given the order to prepare our picnic.

I did not care a lot about eating. I wanted to go and look for the hermit. But it was very disappointing—someone told me that the hermit was not there. Imagine my disappointment! A hermit is someone who wants to be alone in his hut. Imagine…he learned that three or four hundred children were coming! So he must have gone somewhere and hidden himself. I believed that the hermit was still somewhere there in the woods, and that if I ventured into the woods I might have a chance to see him and talk to him. So I left my friends, my *copains*, there, and I went alone into the forest. The forest was large, and there was not much chance of meeting someone who wanted to hide himself in it.

A few minutes after I went into the forest, I began to hear the sound of dripping water. The sound was so clear, so nice--like the sound of a piano. It was so interesting that I tried to go in the direction of the sound. Very soon after that I discovered a very beautiful natural well, made of blocks of stone. The water was very high, and when I saw the water, so clear, so refreshing, I was so happy, because I was extremely thirsty. To see the water was something wonderful. So I came close to the well, I looked down, and I could see every detail at the bottom of the well. The water was so limpid. I used my hand to cup the water and I drank it. It was so delicious; I cannot describe to you how delicious it was. I had never drunk anything like that. Believe me, it was much better than Coca-Cola, even Coca-Cola with ice.

After having drunk the water from the well, I felt completely satisfied. At that time I could not describe my feeling, but now I think I can describe my feeling: it was the feeling of being completely satisfied, when you don’t have any more desire, even the desire to meet the hermit. Very strange—why? Because in that moment, as a small boy, I believed that the hermit had transformed himself into a well so that I could meet him privately, in a kind of private audience with the hermit. You know, I had been reading a lot of fairy tales, so I really believed that the hermit had transformed himself into a well so that I could meet him personally. So I felt very privileged; I felt that I was the only one who could have that wonderful opportunity of meeting the hermit. Then I sat very close to the stones, and I lay down and looked at the sky. The sky was very blue. I remember also seeing a few leaves of a branch that was close by, hanging across the sky. Just a minute later, I fell into a very deep sleep.

I don’t know how long I slept, but the sleep must have been very deep, because when I woke up I did not know where I was. I had to look around to realize that I was on the top of the Na Son Mountain The space was so special, the circumstances so special: I alone was allowed into that space to have that wonderful encounter with the hermit in the form of a well. I did not want to leave the well. I wanted to stay up there, but I remembered that my friends must have been waiting for me. I had just suddenly disappeared, and that could have made them very worried. So I had to leave the natural well with a lot of regret. On my way down, suddenly a sentence came to my head, not in Vietnamese, but in French: "I have tasted the most wonderful water in the world." That water may symbolize a kind of spiritual experience.

When I arrived, my friends asked me where I had been. I did not say anything—I did not tell them anything. I don’t know why. It seems that I wanted to keep the event as something sacred; I did not want to share. I had the impression that if I told them about that, I would lose something. That is why I was not talkative at all, that afternoon. You know, my first experience with a Buddha was seeing the drawing on the cover of a Buddhist magazine, of someone sitting on the grass, very peacefully. My second encounter with the Buddha was when I was on the top of the Mountain Na-Son, and drinking the water from that natural well. Later on, when I was twelve, I made the determination that I would ask permission of my mother and father to become a monk, and I kept that secret for many years. It was when I was about sixteen that I formally made a request, and it was very fortunate that my parents agreed.

I have told you that Siddhartha, before he became a Buddha, had already suffered a lot as a young man, a teenager. He was looking very hard to see a path by which he could bring happiness to himself and to many people around him, a path which could help him to transform and to reduce the amount of suffering that he could see in himself and around him.

(Bell)

I know that the young people must be confused from time to time. I understand them. I know that by looking around they may not see something beautiful, something really true or good to follow. Your feeling is like the feeling of Siddhartha Gautama before he became the Buddha. That kind of search is legitimate. It is very hard to be there when you don't really see something truly beautiful, truly good. So many young people in our time do not know what to do with their lives, just because they don't see any meaning to their lives. That is why they live in a way that can destroy them, both physically and mentally. I would like to invite the young people to inquire about the Buddha as a young man, as someone who was searching for some meaning for his life. The Buddha practiced, got insight, and with that insight and compassion he spent forty-five years helping the people of his time, and after his passing away he continued to serve. Many people today consider themselves to be the students of the Buddha, practicing in a way that makes it possible for understanding and compassion to be born in their hearts. When you have understanding and compassion in your heart, your life has a meaning. You can relate to all living beings around you, and you know that you can do something; you can be something, that can help relieve the suffering around you.

Yesterday I got a request from a magazine in North America. I don't know if you know of the magazine called *Self*. That is a magazine for young women in the United States. Arnie says that the circulation of that magazine is very large: every month they print 1,100,000 copies. They wanted me to write something about freedom. They asked, "Thay, do you think that genuine freedom is possible when suffering is still going on around you? Is it possible to be truly free when so much suffering is going on around you?" I wrote about ten lines, and I said that suffering is part of life, and suffering has a role to play in life, because it is only against the background of suffering that we can identify happiness and well being. If we have not suffered, we have no chance to experience happiness and well-being. So suffering is something that can help us to identify happiness and well-being. To believe in a place where there is only happiness, where there is no suffering at all--to me this is very naïve. Even if it is truly happiness, without suffering there is no means to identify it as happiness. If you have never been hungry, then you cannot experience the joy of having something to eat. If you have not been away from your beloved one, missing him or her a lot, you cannot recognize the joy of being close to that person. That is why happiness and suffering "inter-are."

Also I said that most of the suffering that exists is due to the fact that we are so ignorant. Most of the suffering that we endure comes from our craving, our anger, our hate, our discrimination, and our delusions. If you can get rid of these afflictions in yourself, you can remove a lot of suffering, in yourself and around you. If you practice the teaching of your spiritual tradition, you will be able to develop understanding and compassion within you, and the amount of freedom you enjoy can be measured by the amount of understanding and compassion you have in your heart. If you have more understanding and compassion, then your freedom will be greater. With understanding and compassion in you, you can always help to relieve the suffering around you. Because of that, you are no longer afraid of suffering. You do not allow yourself to be drowned in the ocean of suffering; you do not allow suffering to overwhelm you, because you already know how to transform the suffering within you and around you. You are even capable of smiling at your own sufferings, and the suffering around you, because that smile proves that you have confidence in your capacity to transform it. That smile is born from your awareness that suffering is there, but you can be something, you can do something, in order to remove the suffering around you every day, every hour. That is why freedom is possible. I insist that the amount of freedom you enjoy can be measured by the amount of understanding and compassion that you have in your heart.

I would like to tell the young people that there are ways to live your life so that you can bring more understanding and compassion into your heart. Understanding and compassion are something truly beautiful. If you look deeply into yourself and around you, you will see that the seed of understanding and compassion is in everyone, and if we know the practice, the way of mindful living, then we will be able to generate the energy of understanding and compassion in ourselves. We can recognize what is beautiful, what is true, what is good, in us and around us, and our lives suddenly have a meaning. You are there in order to help, to help relieve the suffering and to bring joy to our daily life. If you have a purpose, a meaning to your life, you will know how to protect yourself, how to protect your body, to protect your mind from the destruction that is going on around you. Your life, your body, and your consciousness will become an instrument for peace, for compassion, and when you protect yourself, when you protect your body and your mind, you help protect all of us. You protect your children, you protect your ancestors, and that is why I would like to tell the young people today that the roots of goodness, the roots of beauty, the roots of truth are within us. If we know how to practice mindful living, then we can touch these wonderful factors in us, and we will be like Siddhartha Gautama, we will see a path to follow, the path of understanding, the path of love that can help reduce the suffering in the world every day.

I have met my hermit in the form of a well. You may have met your hermit also, but you might not have recognized it. Your hermit may have been in the form of a tree, a rock, or a person. I think the moment when we meet the hermit of our life we are transformed, we know where to go. That was my case--when I met my hermit, I knew where I had to go. That is why I asked my parents to allow me to become a monk. Becoming a monk is just one way; there are many other ways that are equally beautiful. So I wish that every one of you here would be able to meet your hermit very soon. And you must be very attentive in order not to miss him, because you might meet him, and yet not recognize him. The hermit can appear to you at any time. But if you are mindful, if you are attentive, when your hermit appears, you will be able to recognize him at once. It would be a joy for me if, someday when you meet the hermit, you will write me a letter, saying "Thay, today I have met my hermit, and I'm very happy, I know where to go now." Don't forget to do that. When you hear the small bell, you may stand up, and bow to the Sangha before leaving the meditation hall.

(Bell)

The Buddha said that every one of us has an island within, an island of peace and stability within, and we should practice so that we can profit from the existence of that island within ourselves. When he was eighty, the Buddha knew that he was going to pass away in a few months, and he knew that his disciples were going to miss him. During the last six months, around the city of Vaisali, he used to talk to the monks and the nuns about taking refuge within yourself. The expression is *atadipa*. *Ata* means self, *dipa* means island. When you go back to that island, you experience peace and stability. The Buddha is there, the Dharma is there, and the Sangha is there.

We can describe the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha as forms of energy. Mindfulness is the kind of energy that helps us to be really there in the present moment, body and mind united. Mindfulness is the kind of energy that helps us to touch life deeply in the present moment. Buddha is my mindfulness, shining near, shining far. So when you have the energy of mindfulness in yourself, the Buddha is present, and light is there. With mindfulness you can see the situation more clearly, and you know exactly what to do and what not to do. We know that the practice of mindful breathing can maintain your mindfulness alive as long as you wish. Or the practice of walking meditation can also maintain mindfulness alive as long as you wish. So you might like to keep the Buddha with you, to invite him to stay with you as long as you like, by the practice of mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful sitting. Because that is an energy for your protection. Buddha is not an abstract idea Buddha is something very real. Your Buddha nature is your capacity of being mindful, calm and concentrated. So you have confidence in the Buddha, because you know that you are capable of generating the energy of mindfulness in you. What makes a Buddha a Buddha is the energy of mindfulness. Mindfulness carries within itself the energy of calm concentration, and if mindfulness is there for some time, insight is born. That is why mindfulness, concentration and insight go together. So, in your island you have the Buddha. Visualize a beautiful island within yourself, with beautiful trees, clear streams of water, birds, all your ancestors, spiritual or blood, and you can encounter the Buddha, you can take the hand of the Buddha and walk on that island. It is possible. When you are mindful you are a Buddha at the same time. Taking the hand of the Buddha and walking is something you can do every day.

Be an island unto yourself. "As an island unto myself, Buddha is my mindfulness, shining near, shining far. Dharma is my breathing, guarding body and mind." The Dharma is there in the island, and I can deeply touch the Dharma inside of me. The Dharma not as a talk, not as a book, but the living Dharma; because when you practice mindful breathing, you are generating the living Dharma, the Dharma that does not need words. When you are practicing mindfulness of breathing or walking, you yourself become the living Dharma. When we see you, we see the Dharma. And if you teach, you don't teach with your mouth, you teach with your body, your breath, your steps. So the living Dharma is something real, not something abstract. You can afford to have the Dharma anytime you want, available twenty-four hours a day, if you care to touch it. Dharma is my breathing, protecting body and mind. Because mindful breathing helps mindfulness to stay alive. The energy of mindfulness is an energy of protection. We know that the energy of mindfulness generated by ourselves can protect us, but the mindfulness generated by a Sangha…

Imagine one thousand, two thousand, three thousand people, practicing walking meditation and enjoying every step they make. A lot of energy is born from that kind of collective practice. I usually organize a day of mindfulness in a practice center called Spirit Rock in northern California, and we usually have 2500 or 3000 people doing walking meditation or sitting meditation together. The collective energy of mindfulness is very wonderful, powerful. If you happen to be in that crowd, and if you open yourself for that energy to penetrate into you, you can get healing, you can get transformation. That is why the energy of mindfulness, whether individual or collective, is the Buddha protecting you. We should practice in order to touch the Buddha and the Dharma several times a day, in our daily

lives. The Sangha is also available. First of all the five elements within us--form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, the five Skandhas--may be in disharmony with each other when you don't practice. Illnesses, disease, are born when the five elements are in contradiction, in disharmony. But when you begin to practice mindfulness of breathing, the energy of mindfulness generated from the practice of mindful breathing begins to reorganize the Five Elements. The Five Elements begin to come together and operate in harmony, and that is a Sangha, the Sangha within. Sangha means harmony, a community living in harmony. So we look into our person, and we recognize the five elements of our person. The physical aspect is form, and then there are the feelings, the perceptions, the mental formations and the consciousnesses. Under the supervision and the guidance of mindful breathing the Five Elements begin to come together and operate in harmony. Your territory begins to be surveyed by mindfulness, and you know how to restore peace and harmony within your kingdom of the Five Elements. The Sangha is inside, it is not only around you, but it is inside. Therefore, when you go back to the island of self with mindfulness, you have a wonderful refuge. In difficult moments, you should be able to dwell in security in that kind of island. Make it available, learn to enjoy and to make use of that island within yourself. That is the recommendation made by Buddha when he was eighty.

Suppose there is a storm raging—you don't mind, because your house is solid. You close all the doors and windows, and although the wind is blowing fiercely outside, and there is rain and thunder, you still feel safe within your home. The island of self is like that. You have to practice, to learn, in order to allow that shelter, that island within yourself to appear for your use. During your daily life, learn to dwell in that safe island of mindfulness within you. Then you will be protected from provocations, you will be protected from anger, and from despair. There are many elements around you that are ready to invade you, to attack you and to deprive you of your peace and stability. So you have to organize in order to protect yourself, and to build up the practice of dwelling in that island of self is the practice recommended by the Buddha.

In the position of sitting, of walking, while you are doing the cooking, of the washing, please learn to dwell in that island of self, and feel safe when you do these things. When you need to go out of the house you can still carry that island of self with you, and everywhere you go you will feel safe, because you have a safe island to protect you. Nothing can assail you anymore, because you have that island of self, available every moment. During your sleep that island is also available. Before going to sleep, you can go back to that island and feel comfortable there. No one can remove that island of safety from you. They can steal your money, they can steal your car, but they can never steal that safe island within yourself. It is possible to tell the young people to practice this same way. They are very vulnerable when they go out into society, and if they don't have a refuge inside, it is very easy for them to get into despair. Please practice taking refuge in the island of self, and help the young people to do the same.

Every time you have a strong emotion, like anger or despair, it is as though you are exposed to a storm. Look at the tree outside the window. She is trying her best to stand in the storm. When you look at the top of the tree, you see that several small branches and leaves are swaying back and forward very violently in the wind, and you have the feeling that they could be broken at any time. We feel very much the same when we are exposed to the storm of emotions. We feel that we may die because the emotion is so strong—the fear, the despair, the anger, the unhappiness—but if you look down a little, you see that the trunk of the tree is firmly rooted in the soil, and then you have another impression. You know that the tree is going to stand in the storm. We are like trees also. On this level we are very vulnerable. So during the storms of emotion, if you dwell on this level, the level of the brain, the level of the heart, you might be broken, you might feel that you are not going to be able to stand it, you are going to die. But bring your attention, down, down, to the navel, a little bit below the navel, and pay attention to the rising and falling of your stomach, practicing mindful breathing. When you breathe in your stomach will rise, and when you breathe out, your stomach will fall. To stop all the thinking, to just focus all your attention on the rise and fall of your stomach, and to dwell there at the root of your tree, and not to float up here at the level of the heart or the brain, is a very important practice. If you can do that for ten minutes, or fifteen minutes, the emotion will go away and you survive the storm. And if you can survive the storm once, you have confidence. The next time that depression comes, when a strong emotion comes, you will do the same. And that confidence is very important in you.

We should know that we are more, much more than our emotions. An emotion is something that comes, stays for some time, and goes. Things are impermanent. Nothing can be permanent. Your emotion is not going to stay there forever. You know that you are more than your emotions. Why do you have to die because of one emotion? But so many young people, when they are overwhelmed by their emotions, have the feeling that they cannot stand it, and the only way to stop the suffering is to go and kill themselves. That is why the number of young people who commit suicide in our times is so high: they don't know how to handle their emotions. It's not very difficult – to be

aware that the emotion is just an emotion. It is born, it stays for some time, and it will go away. Why do you have to die because of it? You are much more than your emotions.

If you know how to practice taking good care of your tree during a storm, you will be all right. If you continue to think, to imagine, and if you give yourself up to the feeling, you will be blown away. You need to know how to go down to your roots and concentrate all your mind into mindful breathing and into the rise and fall of your abdomen. The best position is the sitting position, because in that position you are more solid. I am sure that after about a dozen, or twenty minutes, your emotion will go away, and you will have proved that you are stronger than your emotion. But please don't wait until a strong emotion comes in order to practice, because by that time you will have forgotten the practice. So, please try right now, every day, and spend a number of minutes practicing that way. After some time, perhaps twenty-one days, you will have the habit, and if an emotion comes you will remember to practice. If you have overcome once, you will have a tremendous confidence in your capacity of dealing with the emotions. You have to be capable of doing that, and show it to the young people, that is it is okay to have an emotion, and that we can take care of our emotions. We can teach the young people to do it, even if they are still very young: "Darling, you sit with Mommy. I will hold your hand. Let us not think of anything; let us pay attention to our bellies. Breathing in, it is rising; breathing out, it is falling." And you can use your mindfulness to support your child, and both you and your child can practice together. She will develop confidence also, because after that the crisis will go away, and she will have faith in the practice. Try your best to put into practice the teaching of the Buddha, going back to the island of self, enjoying the island of self. Then when you feel agitated, when you feel insecure, when you feel unstable, just follow your in-breath and out-breath, and come back to that island of self, and you'll feel all right. These practices are not complicated—just the good habit of doing that and you have your refuge.

In Buddhism we speak of taking refuge in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. But to me, taking refuge is not a matter of belief. It is a matter of practice. Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are not abstract things, things that exist only in the cloud. Buddha is the energy of mindfulness that you do have, even if it's not sufficient yet; you know that if you continue the practice you will cultivate more of it for your protection. Dharma…you know that you can transform yourself into living Dharma if you know how to live your daily life mindfully, the art of mindful living. And Sangha…you know you can coordinate, you can restore harmony between different elements within yourself, and between you and other members of the community. So Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are very concrete, you can touch them with your finger, or with your feet. The island of safety is made of these elements, and to practice like that is to practice protecting yourself and protecting your beloved ones. If you are safe, then you can help another person to be safe. Remember when the plane is about to take off: the flight attendant always reminds you that if it should happen that there is not enough oxygen to breathe, oxygen masks will be available and you should put on your oxygen mask first, before helping your child. This is the same thing. You have to make the island of self available to yourself first, and then you can help the people in your family, your beloved one, to enjoy the same practice.

(Bell)

In our midst there is a lady who has cancer. She has been coming to Plum Village every year and practicing, and every time she gets back the quality of her blood is always much better than if she had stayed in her own country. It is a pity that she cannot stay here, because I know that to be here, practicing with a Sangha and living a simple life, would help her very much with her health. She wrote to me, "Thay, I am very grateful for the practice, for the Dharma, for the teaching. I see its value, its effectiveness. I want to live I don't want to die. I am still very young." I think this is partly the question of the environment. Our society is organized in such a way that we live our daily lives without a lot of peace and stability, and there is a lot of stress. So the question of changing the environment, whether to go somewhere else, or whether to work together with other friends to transform the environment where we find it, is very important. Bring more elements of the Pure Land into your place. Maybe elements of your Pure Land are hidden somewhere there, somewhere very close to you. Discover them, and make them available in your immediate surroundings. With some practice of looking deeply, we might effect some changes in our environment, so that the place will be safer to live, and healing can take place more easily. This is the problem of Sangha building. That is why, during all of the retreats that we offer in Europe and North America, we always urge people to meet to discuss Sangha building, and also the work of improving the environment.

All of us want to live we don't want to die. But the question of living and dying is a deep question within Buddhism, and the practice of looking deeply can show us that it's not possible for us to die, because our true nature is the nature of no-birth and no-death. Birth and death are just two aspects of the same reality. Without

dying, birth cannot take place. We know that many of the cells in our body die every day. If they didn’t die, how could life be possible? How could the new cells be born? So birth and death help each other to be possible. If we had to mourn and cry and organize funerals every time a cell died in our bodies, we would not have time left to do anything else.

When you come to a Buddhist practice center, you might learn ways to relieve some of your suffering, such as fear, despair, anger, agitation, and so on. You may learn ways to improve your relationship with the other person, but the greatest relief you get is by touching your own nature, your true nature of no-birth and no-death, and that is the ultimate purpose of Buddhist meditation. We know that meditation means to stop, to be there, to be calmer, to be more concentrated, so that you can look deeply into what is there in the here and the now. You can see deeply into the true nature of reality. The insight you get will liberate you from your fear, your suffering. Looking deeply is the phrase we use to translate *vipashyana*, translated sometimes as "insight meditation." You practice into order to get insight into the true nature of reality. That practice can be described simply as the practice of looking deeply. But how to look deeply? Do you have to use your thinking? Or do you have to refrain from thinking in order to really practice looking deeply?

You have to touch your nature to know who you truly are. In the beginning we have talked about the wave, and the water. We know that a wave can live her life as a wave, but she can also live her life as water at the same time. It would be a pity if a wave did not know that she is water. To be a wave is wonderful, but to be a non-wave is also wonderful. I have asked the children to draw a wave, and after that to draw water for me. Water can be a wave, but water can be a non-wave, and water can be very, very still, to the point that she can reflect the blue sky and the clouds and the trees perfectly. We can enjoy being a wave, but we can enjoy just being still water. Where can we find that stillness? Does it exist in the wave? Yes, because you cannot take the wave out of the water, and therefore, touching the wave deeply, you touch the water in within it, and you know that if you can touch the water, you can touch the capacity of being still. No one denies the fact that water can be still. So the capacity of being still, the capacity of reflecting things as they are, you know that is in the water. The Buddha nature, the capacity of understanding, of loving, of being non-fear, of being liberated, we have it deep within ourselves. So once we have touched that true nature within ourselves, we can transcend all kinds of fear. We know that being a wave is wonderful, but being a non-wave is also beautiful.

I want to live, yes that is the truth, but who forbids you to live? If you don’t live in this form, then you will live in another form. When the time comes for the cloud to become rain, if the cloud is wise, the cloud will not be upset, or be scared, because the cloud know that being a cloud floating in the sky is wonderful, but being the rain falling on the ocean, on the mountain, on the field, is also wonderful. When you have touched that nature of no-birth and no-death in you, you can remove your fear, you can remove your anguish, your suffering. The ultimate purpose of Buddhist meditation is to touch your true nature of no-birth and no-death. That true nature is sometimes called *nirvana.*

Nirvana means extinction. Extinction of what? Extinction of notions such as being and non-being, birth and death, one and many. We have created all these notions that become the ground of all our suffering and our fear. Because we have not been able to touch the true nature of our being, we are caught by these pairs of opposites. To die, what does it mean? In our minds it means that you are someone, and then suddenly you become no one. You are something; suddenly you become nothing—that is our idea of death. But if we observe things deeply, we see nothing like that in reality. There is nothing that can be reduced to nothing, or to nothingness. Can you reduce a cloud into nothingness? No, you can only help the cloud to become rain. You can help the rain to become snow. But you cannot make a cloud into nothingness. A sheet of paper—can you reduce it into nothingness? No. You may burn it, and it is transformed in many ways. Part of it will become a cloud, the smoke rising. Part of it will become the heat, penetrating into the cosmos. Part of it will become ash that can be reborn as a flower or a blade of grass, sometime later. So everything is on their way, on their journey of manifestation of being. You are also like that. If you don’t manifest yourself in this form, then you manifest yourself in another form. Please don’t be afraid of being nothing. Nothingness is just an idea. Non-being is just an idea. The Buddha said not only is non-being an idea, but being is also an idea. Reality transcends both being and non-being.

When conditions are sufficient, something manifests itself, and you describe it as being. But when the conditions are not sufficient, and it has not manifested, you describe it as non-being. That is wrong. It’s like when you look into space, into the air. You don’t see any color, you don’t hear any sound, you don’t see anything, but if you have a radio or a television set, you will capture radio or television programs, and sights and sounds will manifest themselves. So the radio or the television set is just one more condition enabling you to see the signals manifest.

Signals are reaching us all the time, signals from satellites, and because we lack one condition, we believe that they do not exist, but they do exist. So our notion of being is also a notion. And our notion of non-being is another notion. Reality transcends both being and non-being. That is the teaching of the Buddha in so many, many discourses. The typical sentence is like this: when conditions are sufficient, your body manifests, and you say that the body "is". And when conditions are not longer sufficient, and your body does not manifest itself, then you say that there is no body. Your idea of "there is" and "there is not" are just ideas. Your true nature is free from these two ideas: being and non-being. That is why, within the teachings of the Buddha, to be or not to be, that is not the question. The Buddha helps us to practice stopping, concentrating, calming, in order to be able to direct our looking deeply into the heart of things, to discover the true nature of reality, the nature of no birth, no death, no being, no non-being, no coming, no going. If you come to a practice center, and you don't learn anything about that practice, it would be a pity.

The Buddha offered us a teaching called the teaching about the Three Dharma Seals. A seal is something that you use to certify that something is authentic it is not a fake. So every teaching that does not bear the mark of the Three Dharma Seals cannot be described as an authentic Buddhist teaching. I would like to tell you something about this teaching today, because some of you have to leave tomorrow.

Impermanence, *Anitya*, is the first Dharma Seal. Any teaching that does not bear the mark of impermanence is not a Buddhist teaching. What does impermanence mean in the context of the Buddha's teaching? Impermanence means that everything is changing all the time. Nothing can remain the same in two consecutive moment--you also. The "you" of this minute is no longer the "you" of a minute ago. So you are not identical to yourself in two consecutive moments. Intellectually, we understand that, but practically, we don't behave as if we have seen that truth. When you live with someone close to you, you might practice impermanence, because impermanence should not be a theory, it should be a practice, an insight. You dwell in the concentration of impermanence when you know that you are impermanent, and so is the person who lives with you. You don't know what will happen to you tomorrow, or what will happen to her tomorrow. That is why you cherish this present moment as the most important moment, and you know that everything you can do to make her happy today, you do it, without waiting until tomorrow. Many of us live in such a way that it seems as if the other person is going to be there for one million years, and she will remain the same for ever and ever. That is ignorance that is the absence of the insight of impermanence. So the insight of impermanence helps you to be aware that if there are things you can do today to make him happy, you should do them right away. This present moment is a wonderful moment when you can feel life as something real. You don't wait until tomorrow in order to live your life, because you know that this moment is a very special moment. It is available, and you are able to recognize it as the only moment when you are able to live deeply. So you touch life deeply in that moment, because you have the insight of impermanence. You cherish the presence of the person you love in this very moment, because she is available only in the here and the now.

Impermanence is not something pessimistic, because impermanence is the very ground of life. If things were not impermanent, life would not be possible. If things were not impermanent, your daughter could not grow up, she would remain like that for ever. If things were not impermanent, the dictatorial regime would remain like that forever. If things were not impermanent, the grain of corn that you sowed yesterday would remain a grain of corn for the whole year. It is because of impermanence that life is possible. If things are impermanent, it is possible for you to transform your pain and your suffering. So impermanence is good. You suffer not because things are impermanent, you suffer because things are impermanent but you believe them to be permanent. That is why the insight on impermanence helps you not to suffer too much. Impermanence is an insight, a concentration, a *samádhi*. You can dwell in the insight of impermanence, and you will become a very wise person. So if impermanence is a samádhi, a concentration, an insight, you should not deal with it as a theory. You have to live with it. One who keeps the insight of impermanence alive within himself can avoid making a lot of mistakes and can bring a lot of happiness to the people who live around him.

(Bell)

What is non-self, *Anattá* (Pali*)*? It means impermanence. If things are impermanent, they don't remain the same things forever. You of this moment are no longer you of a minute ago. There is no permanent entity within us, there is only a stream of being. There is always a lot of input and output. The input and the output happen in every second, and we should learn how to look at life as streams of being, and not as separate entities. This is a very profound teaching of the Buddha. For instance, looking into a flower, you can see that the flower is made of many elements that we can call non-flower elements. When you touch the flower, you touch the cloud. You cannot remove the cloud from the flower, because if you could remove the cloud from the flower, the flower would

collapse right away. You don’t have to be a poet in order to see a cloud floating in the flower, but you know very well that without the clouds there would be no rain and no water for the flower to grow. So cloud is part of flower, and if you send the element cloud back to the sky, there will be no flower. Cloud is a non-flower element. And the sunshine…you can touch the sunshine here. If you send back the element sunshine, the flower will vanish. And sunshine is another non-flower element. And earth, and gardener…if you continue, you will see a multitude of non-flower elements in the flower. In fact, a flower is made only with non-flower elements. It does not have a separate self.

A flower cannot be by herself alone. A flower has to "inter-be" with everything else that is called non-flower. That is what we call inter-being. You cannot be, you can only inter-be. The word inter-be can reveal more of the reality than the word "to be". You cannot be by yourself alone, you have to inter-be with everything else. So the true nature of the flower is the nature of inter-being, the nature of no self. The flower is there, beautiful, fragrant, yes, but the flower is empty of a separate self. To be empty is not a negative note. Nargarjuna, of the second century, said that because of emptiness, everything becomes possible.

So a flower is described as empty. But I like to say it differently. A flower is empty only of a separate self, but a flower is full of everything else. The whole cosmos can be seen, can be identified, can be touched, in one flower. So to say that the flower is empty of a separate self also means that the flower is full of the cosmos. It’s the same thing. So you are of the same nature as a flower: you are empty of a separate self, but you are full of the cosmos. You are as wonderful as the cosmos; you are a manifestation of the cosmos. So non-self is another guide that Buddha offers us in order for us to successfully practice looking deeply. What does it mean to look deeply? Looking deeply means to look in such a way that the true nature of impermanence and non-self can reveal themselves to you. Looking into yourself, looking into the flower, you can touch the nature of impermanence and the nature of non-self, and if you can touch the nature of impermanence and non-self deeply, you can also touch the nature of nirvana, which is the Third Dharma Seal.

We have spoken about two dimensions of reality. The first dimension is described as the historical dimension, *dimension historique*, and the other dimension, the ultimate dimension. When we look at a wave, we see that the wave is revealed through many characteristics. The wave seems to have a beginning and the wave seems to have an end. The wave seems to have an "up" and a "down". The wave can be seen as this or that, more beautiful or less beautiful than that, more intelligent, more spiritual or less spiritual than the other waves. And these ideas, such as birth and death, beginning or end, high or low, more or less beautiful, make the life of the wave miserable. If the wave is caught into these notions, the wave does not seem to understand impermanence and non-self. In fact, the wave is made of all the other waves. You can calculate that wave is born from the movement of the water, and looking into the wave, if you make a study of it, you can understand what is going on in the ocean. It is like the nuclear scientists who said that one electron is made of all the other electrons. One electron can be simultaneously here and there, everywhere. That language cannot be easily understood by those of us who do not know anything about nuclear physics.

Those of us who have practiced looking deeply into the nature of no-birth and no-death, who understand the kind of language that the Buddha used, have heard that the wave, while living her life as a wave, can learn to live the life of water at the same time. If she can go back to herself, and touch the water within herself, she will get rid of all these notions: beginning and end, high and low, more or less beautiful. Once she knows that she is water, then all the fear, all the jealousy, all the discrimination will vanish, and she will have peace. We are also like that. Touching our true nature of no-birth and no-death, we will no longer be afraid of anything, whether that is being or non-being, whether that is beginning or ending, coming or going, one or many. Nirvana here means the silencing of all notions, including the notions of coming, going, being, non-being, birth and death. If you have a coin, that can be an example. You see the head, the tail, two aspects of the franc. One is impermanence, one is no self; in fact, these are the same, they belong to the same reality. And there is a third dimension: that is the metal that the piece of money is made of. It is nirvana; it is the base for the other things. So impermanence and non-self are what we experience when we begin to touch the world of birth and death, when we touch the historical dimension. If we know how to touch, we will touch the nature of impermanence, of non-self. And when we touch this nature deeply, we touch nirvana. You don’t have to leave the world of the phenomena in order to touch the world of the noumena. You don’t have to stop being a wave in order to become water. You can live your historical dimension deeply, with mindfulness, then you can touch very deeply your true nature of being.

There was a student of meditation in Vietnam, who lived in the thirteenth century. One day he heard his master saying that you should make an effort to enter into the realm of no-birth and no-death. And the student asked,

"Respected Teacher, where can I find the realm of no-birth and no-death?" and the teacher said, "You can find it right in the world of birth and death." Where do you tell the wave to go to find water? You find water right in the wave. So nirvana, the nature of no-birth and no-death, is right there in the world of birth and death, if you know how to touch it, because birth and death is only an appearance.

To be born, what does it mean? In our minds, to be born means that from nothing you suddenly become something, from no one, you suddenly become someone; but looking deeply you don't see anything like that. From nothing, how could something become something? A sheet of paper, before it was born as a sheet of paper, was it nothing? Or was it something already. The sheet of paper, before it was born, was the sunshine, the cloud, and the tree. The moment of its birth was only a moment of transformation, of continuation. So that is not exactly the moment of birth. The moment of your birth is only a moment of continuation, because before you were born, you have already been there. From nothing, you can never become something. From no one, you can never become someone. That is why, instead of singing "happy birthday to you", we should sing "happy continuation day to you". Also, at the moment of our so-called death, we can sing the same: happy continuation to you. You continue in other forms. But you don't need this moment to come in order for you to continue.

When I look at myself, I see very clearly that I have begun my continuation a long time ago. If you look at me a little more deeply, you will find out that I am not only here, I am elsewhere, like an electron, which is at the same time here, and there. If you get in touch with my disciples, my students, you recognize my presence in them. If you pick up a book or a tape in a distant city, you know that I am there. So I am not really only here. I am everywhere. I have gone into many directions. It is very difficult for you to identify my presence if you don't practice looking deeply. And it is impossible for me to die. I will continue for a long time. And I am in you. You cannot reduce me into nothingness. My practice, my being, my insight, my suffering, my happiness, have gone very far, so far that I have no means to know. I am now in my own country giving Dharma talks, doing sitting meditation with other people. I am now in a distant prison, because there are prisoners who are practicing sitting meditation and walking meditation using my books. I am in China, I am in Japan, I am in Russia. So it is not easy to identify my presence, if you don't know how to practice looking deeply.

In Zen circles, sometimes they may give you a subject of meditation to ponder: "Tell me, novice, what did your face look like before your grandmother was born?" That is a very nice invitation to go on a journey to find your true self, your true nature, the nature of no-birth and no-death. Nirvana is not something that we don't have, that we have to attain. Just as water is not something that the wave does not already have: the wave has always been water. We have been "nirvanized" a long time ago. We need only to go deep into ourselves to recognize the fact that our ground of being is nirvana. If you come from the Christian tradition, you might like to call it God--Nirvana, the ground of your being, the ground of no-birth and no-death. There is no reason for you to be afraid, and you can enjoy every moment of your daily life that is available to you. The greatest gift that the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara can make to you is the gift of non-fear. The insight into the nature of no-birth and no-death is the ultimate aim of the practice. It would be a pity if you came to a practice center and did not learn anything about that. There are many discourses of the Buddha on this subject. Enjoy your studies and enjoy your practice.

(Three bells)

(End of Dharma talk)